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Honduras Reported Reluctant to Aid Nicaraguan Rebels Alone

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TEGUCIGALPA, Honduras, Jan. 26 — The Honduran Government may decide to stop supporting Nicaraguan anti-Government guerrillas if the United States Congress votes not to renew funding for the rebels later this year, according to several Honduran and Western officials here.

Senior Honduran Army officers and Government officials are waiting to see how Congress votes before deciding on their policy toward the rebels. But the subject is already the source of emotional debate within the Honduran military and of sensitive negotiations between Honduras and the United States, according to officials here.

The Hondurans say they fear they would be left alone to pick up the pieces if the program to create a guerrilla war inside Nicaragua fell apart.

"Who trained these people? Who led them?" a Honduran professional with close contacts in the Government asked, contending the rebels' future was the responsibility of the United States.

Honduras May Limit Rebels

Government officials here say that if American support is renewed, Honduras will almost certainly allow the rebels to continue operating from their bases on the eastern border with Nicaragua, but if funding is permanently ended, Honduras may decide that it is too isolated politically to continue supporting the rebels.

The Government might then either try to end the covert program or limit it to a point where the rebels are no longer a significant force, Western officials here said.

If Congress votes against further aid to the rebels, the Reagan Administration, according to Western officials, will shift to a long-term policy of containing Nicaragua by building up the armed forces of its neighbors and by maintaining a constant American military presence in Honduras.

Honduran officials are openly worried by the difficult decisions they must make in the months ahead. Speaking in interviews, several officials said Honduras counted on a continuing American commitment when, in 1981 and 1982, it allowed the Reagan Administration to begin a Central Intelligence Agency effort to fund and train Nicaraguan exiles on the Honduran border.

Western officials who have monitored the rebels' efforts say the Hondurans have good reason to be worried. They contend that more than 100,000 Nicaraguan-refugees who sympathize with the guerrillas could enter Honduras if lack of money makes the rebel campaign collapse.

The officials also point out that the estimated 10,000 to 12,000 armed Nicaraguan guerrillas who now operate out of Honduras are more than a match for the 14,000 soldiers in the Honduran Army, and that this sharply limits the Hondurans' ability to remove the rebels by force if that should prove necessary.

Honduran officials say they fear that the Nicaraguan rebels will dissolve into uncontrollable marauding bands dedicated to smuggling, extortion and a warlord-style fight against the Sandinistas that lacks political direction.

"The problem is just too big for the Hondurans to handle," said one official here who keeps track of aid to the guerrillas.

Rebel Future in Doubt

Western officials expressed doubts that the rebels could continue without renewed American aid. They said that the guerrillas have managed to keep the war going by appealing to Nicaraguan exiles, third countries and private American corporations for help, but that they had sought such support as a stopgap measure until Congressional funding was renewed.

The United States is believed to have given the rebels almost \$80 million before aid was cut off by Congress. In October, Congress did approve \$14 million for the rebels in the current fiscal year, but tied release of the money to a second vote, to be taken after February.

Senior Nicaraguan guerrilla officials and the American officials who advised them had easy access to the highest levels of the Honduran Army when it was led by General Gustavo Alvarez Martínez, a determined anti-Communist and close confidant of the American Embassy here.

But the younger officers who deposed General Alvarez last March have been less pliant as allies of the United States. In recent months the army high command has demanded a bilateral security pact with the United States while distancing itself from the guerrillas.

Army and Government officials now openly criticize the Administration's policy towards the Nicaraguan guerrillas, saying it is poorly planned and does not define what the rebels are supposed to achieve.

At first, Administration officials said the guerrillas' purpose was to cut off arms supplies from Nicaragua to El Salvador. Today, they suggest that the goal is to force Nicaragua's Sandinista Government to accept major changes in its military and political policies.

Senior Western officials involved in the effort here to support the rebels expressed personal bitterness at the possibility that the United States might not fund the rebels. They said such a decision would amount to abandonment of the guerrillas.

But, from the start, American officials have treated the rebels as an instrument of American policy toward Nicaragua rather than as participants in an insurgency that has the right to define its own goals.

Robert C. McFarlane, President Reagan's National Security Adviser, made a visit to Honduras last week to tell the Government that the Administration would do all it could to convince Congress to renew support for the Nicaraguan rebels. The Hondurans, however, did not seem to be reassured.

Asked what guarantees Mr. McFarlane had offered, the Honduran Foreign Minister, Edgardo Paz Barnica, suggested the meeting had been difficult, and then replied: "He said the Reagan Administration would never abandon its friends in Central America."